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HOW THE CUBAN INVASION FAILED

Last April's U.S.-backed invasion of Cuba's Bay of Pigs will be long remembered and angrily debated. In the September issue of FORTUNE, the magazine's Washington Correspondent Charles J. V. Murphy tells in behind-the-scenes detail the incredible story of how that invasion failed. Excerpts:

THE idea for the invasion had taken root during the early summer of 1960. By then, thousands of defectors from Castro's Cuba were in the U.S. Many of them were soldiers. The job of organizing and training them was given to the Central Intelligence Agency. It became the specific responsibility of one of the CIA's top deputies, Richard M. Bissell, a former economist who is also a highly practical executive.

During the summer and fall of 1960, President Eisenhower from time to time personally reviewed the scheme. In late November, the last time it came up for his comprehensive review, an operational plan had not yet crystallized. It was taken for granted that a landing in force could not possibly be brought off unless the expedition was shepherded to the beach by the U.S. Navy (either openly or in disguise) and covered by air power in whatever amount might be necessary. Eisenhower, the commander of Normandy, understood this well enough.

After his election, Kennedy had been briefed fairly frequently on the Cuban situation. He discussed Cuba at length in both his preinaugural talks with Eisenhower. On taking office, Kennedy decided that he had to have from the Joint Chiefs of Staff a technical opinion of the feasibility of the project.

How It Was Planned. The plan still assumed that U.S. military help would be on call during the landing. Castro's air force consisted of not quite two-score planes—a dozen or so obsolete B-26s, plus about the same number of obsolete British Sea Furies. But in addition there were seven or eight T-33 jet trainers, the remnant of an earlier U.S. transaction with the Batista government, so the force was not the push-over it appeared at first glance. Armed with rockets, these jets would be more than a match in a battle for the exiles' B-26s.

It stood to reason that, considering how small the landing party was, the success of the operation would hinge on the B-26s' controlling the air over the beachhead. And the margins

that the planners accepted were narrow to begin with. The B-26s were to operate from a staging base in a Central American country more than 500 miles from Cuba. The round trip would take better than six hours, and that would leave the planes with fuel for only 45 minutes of action over Cuba. In contrast, Castro's air force could be over the beachhead and the invaders' ships in a matter of minutes. Hence the absolute necessity of knocking out Castro's air power, or at least reducing it to impotence, by the time the ground battle was joined.

This, in general terms, was the plan the Chiefs reviewed for Kennedy. They judged the tactical elements sound, and indeed they accorded the operation a high probability of success. But some of Kennedy's closest advisers were assailed by sinking second thoughts. What bothered them was the "immorality" of masked aggression. They recoiled from having the U.S. employ subterfuge in striking down even as dangerous an adversary as Castro, and they were unanimously opposed to having the U.S. do the job in the open.

The Changes. The "immorality" of the intervention found its most eloquent voice before the President during a meeting in the State Department on April 4, only 13 days before the date set for the invasion. The occasion was Bissell's final review of the operation, and practically everybody connected with high strategy was on hand—Secretary of State Rusk, Secretary of Defense McNamara, Secretary of the Treasury Dillon, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Lemnitzer, CIA Chief Allen Dulles, as well as McGeorge Bundy, Paul Nitze, then Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American affairs, Thomas Mann and three Kennedy specialists in Latin American matters—Adolf Berle, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and Richard Goodwin. There was also one outsider, Senator William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, whose support Kennedy wanted. After Bissell had completed his briefing, and Dulles had summed up risks and prospects, Fulbright denounced the proposition out of hand: it was the wrong thing for the U.S. to get involved in.

Rusk said he was for it, in answer to the President's direct question, but as would presently be manifest, he privately had no heart for it. Two other men among the President's senior foreign policy advisers, not present at the meeting, shared